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ABSTRACT

The way in which children's transition to primary school is managed can set the stage not only for children's school success, but also their response to future transitions. This study examined transition experiences of young children, their families, and their early childhood and primary school teachers, by means of interviews and detailed observations in early childhood centers and new entrant classrooms in New Zealand. Participating were 7 case study children and their families, who were visited a number of times from when the children were 4-year-olds until they turned 8, and an additional 16 children whose parents were interviewed. Seventeen of the 23 children were New Zealand European, with the remaining 6 children of Asian, Polynesian, or Arabic backgrounds. Observations of the new entrant classrooms were conducted, with additional observations focused on the case study children in kindergarten and in their new entrant classrooms. Repeated semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents of case study children at school entry, 2 months later, and 18 months later. Case study children were interviewed at 8 years. Common themes arose in the child and adult interview data regarding issues relating to continuity between settings and what is important for children's early learning. Although discontinuity provided challenge for children upon school entry, the children adapted quickly, with long-term impact relating to their relationships with family and friends. Teachers varied in their views on continuity in early learning. Many parents valued greater structure in early childhood centers as providing some continuity between the two settings. (Contains 45 references.) (KB)

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Multiple perspectives on continuity in early learning and the transition to school

ED 447 916

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This paper presents the findings of a New Zealand study that explores the transition experiences of a range of children, their families, and their early childhood and primary school teachers, through interviews and detailed observations in early childhood centres and new entrant classrooms. The participants include seven case study children and their families who were visited a number of times from when the children were four-years-old until they turned eight. The paper examines the multiple perspectives on transition issues and highlights both the diversity in views and experiences, and some common themes and issues. Exploring the nature of the transition from early childhood to school leads us into broader debates about continuity, learning and the nature education in early childhood and at school. The paper considers the implications of the research for practice at both the early childhood and beginning school level.

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In recent years there has been considerable research on the transition to school. Studies from the UK (e.g. Cleave, Jowett & Bate, 1982; Dunlop, 1998; Pollard, 1996), Sweden (e.g. Pramling & Williams-Granеld, 1993), Australia (e.g. Dockett and Perry, 1999; Margetts, 1999), the USA (e.g. Graue, 1993) and New Zealand (e.g. Ledger, Smith & Rich, 1998; Renwick, 1984; Norris, 1999; Peters, 1999a, 1999b) suggest that, although the age at which a child enters school varies from country to country and the precise nature of early education varies both across and within countries, there are many similarities in the issues that arise in relation to this topic.

Although not the first transition for many children, the importance of the transition to school is widely acknowledged. Dockett and Perry (1999) suggest that "the way it is managed sets the stage not only for children's success at school, but also their response to future transitions" (p1). This view is supported by Early, Pianta and Cox (1990) who cite

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many research studies indicating stable trajectories of performance relating to the nature of a child's early experiences at school.

Many authors have noted that children's adjustment may be affected by distress caused by discontinuity between early childhood education and school (e.g. Cleave et al, 1982; Curtis, 1986; Ledger et al, 1998; Renwick, 1987). However, while the differences between the two settings can be considerable (Dockett & Perry, 1999; Richardson, 1997), the nature of the support a child receives in dealing with discontinuity may be more important than maintaining continuity (Ghaye & Pascal, 1988).

Sanchez and Thorpe (1998) suggest that discontinuity is not something to be avoided, providing appropriate scaffolding is given, drawing on Vygotsky's notion of children advancing to "higher stages of development by being stimulated and guided at the outside limits of their skill by others" (Smith, 1998, p3). This theme is picked up by Graue (1998) who explores the idea of scaffolding children for whom the transition is difficult. Rather than concluding that a child is unready for the move, she places responsibility on adults to ease the child into the new environment. The notion therefore that the child simply adjusts to school has been challenged (Ghaye & Pascal, 1988) and the complexity of the transition process is recognised.

The New Zealand Context

In New Zealand there are a wide range of early childhood education services (see Ministry of Education (1998) for details). The early childhood curriculum, *Te Whaariki* (Ministry of Education, 1996), was developed as a curriculum acceptable to the providers of these diverse services (Education Review Office, 2000a). *Te Whaariki* is based on the principles of empowerment, holistic development, family and community and relationships, interwoven with five 'Strands' arising from these; Belonging, Well-being, Exploration, Communication and Contribution (Ministry of Education, 1996).

Carr (1997, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c) describes children's learning dispositions and proposes a framework for assessment in early childhood that is consistent with the principles and

strands of *Te Whaariki* (Carr, 1998b, 1998c). The actions and behaviours assessed in a Learning Story are those of:

- finding something of interest
- becoming involved
- persisting with difficulty
- expressing point of view or feeling
- taking another point of view (or taking responsibility in other ways)

(Carr, 1998c, pp21-22).

Although not compulsory until age six, most New Zealand children start school when they turn five. With children starting on, or just after, their fifth birthdays, new entrant classes grow in size throughout the year. A booklet published by the Education Review Office (2000b) called *Choosing a school for a five-year-old* gives a good overview of many common features of the new entrant classes that they will join. Primary (and secondary) school education is guided by The New Zealand Curriculum Framework which is based on 'Essential Learning Areas' (such as science, social studies, mathematics, each with its own curriculum document) and 'Essential Skills' (e.g. physical skills, communication skills, problem solving skills) (Ministry of Education, 1993). From July 2000 the revised National Administration Guidelines require schools to give priority to student achievement in literacy and numeracy, especially during the first four years of school (Education Review Office, 2000a).

Continuity between sectors is implied in the Ministry of Education's (1994) proposed vision of a seamless education system. However, reporting on the discussion at a national *Transition to School* seminar, Holmes (1998) noted that participants felt there was "sharp cut off" from the early childhood curriculum to the school curriculum (p51). The Education Review Office[1] (1998) saw the nature of the early childhood curriculum as contributing to this discontinuity, stating that:

[1] The Education Review Office is a government department that reports publicly on the quality of education in New Zealand schools and early childhood centres.

> In failing to identify a positive relationship between early childhood education and school education *Te Whaariki* creates the impression that early childhood education exists in a vacuum, is complete in itself and has no relationship with further learning. This has ramifications for children's readiness for school programmes especially in terms of literacy and numeracy (Education Review Office, 1998, p12).

However, this criticism was unfair, given that *Te Whaariki* does outline the connection between each of its 'Strands' and the 'Essential Learning Areas' and 'Essential Skills' of the school curriculum, thus helping early childhood educators to see how children might go on to build on the knowledge, skills and dispositions they are developing in early childhood. With the current focus on literacy and numeracy it seems that it is the less specific nature of the goals in these areas, which, in keeping with the principles of *Te Whaariki* are nested within the goals of communication and exploration (Education Review Office, 2000a), that gives rise to the Education Review Office's comments about lack of continuity. In contrast, the fact that the school curriculum statements (many of which were published prior to *Te Whaariki*) do not refer to the early childhood curriculum, is not identified as problematic.

Placing responsibility for maintaining continuity on the early childhood curriculum (and therefore early childhood educators) as proposed by the Education Review Office (1998) (in the quotation above), by requiring an approach that is more like school, is common place. Corrie (1999) describes similar tensions in the USA, UK and Australia between the early childhood pedagogy of challenging, provoking and supporting learning through scaffolding and creating settings for child-initiated experiences, and the traditional primary school teachers' roles of imparting information or instructing children in large groups. She notes the early childhood educators' struggles to maintain an early childhood pedagogy in the face of pressure to 'push down' the primary school curriculum into early childhood and to replace child-initiated activities with teacher-directed ones.

In responding to these issues it is helpful to look more closely at the experiences of the participants involved. This paper presents some findings from a New Zealand study that

explored the transition experiences of a group of children, their families and their teachers. The data reveal many insights into the transition process. Perspectives on continuity are a recurrent theme in the findings, and issues of continuity are considered here in relation to participants' views of early learning.

Method

This study was carried out in Kowhai School[2], a large (500+ pupils) urban primary school in the North Island of New Zealand, and three contributing kindergartens; Azure, Blue and Cobalt.

Participants

Although many of the 114 new entrant children at Kowhai School were included in the observations, the main child participants were the seven case study children and the other 16 children whose parents were interviewed.

Seventeen of the 23 children whose parents were interviewed were New Zealand European. The backgrounds of the other children were Asian, Polynesian and Arabic. Three children had English as their second language. There were 13 girls and 10 boys. Nine were only or oldest children, 10 were the youngest and 4 had both younger and older siblings. Family size ranged from one to seven children. Further details of the seven case study children have been included in a table in Appendix A.

All 23 children had attended state-funded kindergartens as their primary early childhood education service prior to starting school. Sixteen of the children attended Azure Kindergarten, 4 attended Blue Kindergarten, 1 attended Cobalt Kindergarten and 2 attended other kindergartens. Many children had additional early childhood experiences at Playcentre (an early childhood service run by local parent-cooperatives), home-based care, or private centres.

[2] Pseudonyms have been used for the name of the school, the kindergartens and the participants.

The adults participating in this study were the caregivers of the seven case study children and the caregivers of a further 16 new entrant children, the three new entrant teachers, a representative of the Board of Trustees, the Assistant Principal, Principal and the School Secretary at Kowhai School, and three early childhood teachers, one from each of the kindergartens attended by the case study children.

The new entrant teachers Ms Keane, Ms King and Ms Knight had between 12 and 20 years experience of primary school teaching, with at least three years at the new entrant level, and the AP had over 30 years teaching experience. The three kindergarten teachers Ms Ashby, Ms Bird and Ms Clarke had between 15 and 18 years experience of teaching at the early childhood level.

Procedure

The researcher spent 45 hours observing in the new entrant classrooms. In order to capture the transition experience more fully a further 52 hours were spent observing the case study children, first at kindergarten and then in the new entrant classrooms.

A total of 51 semi-structured interviews were conducted with adult participants. Case study parents were interviewed three times: before the children started school, when the children had been at school for about two months and again eighteen months later. All the interviews were tape-recorded and the transcripts returned to the participants for checking. Field notes were used to record the information from informal conversations that the researcher had with adult and child participants during the study. Later, in order to learn more of the children's perspectives, the seven case study children were interviewed during their third year of school (when they were eight years old) to obtain their reflections on the transition process.

In 20 cases the caregiver who elected to be interviewed was the child's mother. In two families the mother and father were interviewed together and in one family the father was interviewed. In the transcripts, case study parents were noted as CS (mothers) or CS/F

(fathers), mothers of new entrants as M, case study children were given pseudonyms and other children were given a number (e.g. C1).

An interpretive methodology was used to identify and analyse the concepts, relationships and issues within a detailed case study design (Graue and Walsh, 1998; Pollard & Tann, 1993).

Results and discussion

The complexity of the transition process was evident in the very different experiences of the participants and in the views that they expressed. Even for children with similar backgrounds, entering the same classroom in the same week, the experience of starting school was quite different. However, despite the diversity of views and experiences some common themes arose in the data. Many participants talked either directly or indirectly about issues relating to continuity between settings. Nested within the ideas about continuity were ideas about what is important for children's early learning. The results presented here look at the participants' views of early learning, placing particular emphasis on the views of the seven case study children. The first section explores some of case study children's ideas and experiences, which introduces the notion of discontinuity in their learning experiences as *one* aspect of the move from early childhood to school. The second section considers the adult participants' views associated with this theme.

The case study children's perspectives on aspects of their transition

This section draws on the children's eight-year-old interview data when they reflected on their experience of starting school, along with other data from their case study stories, gathered over a two-year period. It looks at some of their experiences of transition, the New Zealand practice of being the only new child, the impact of these experiences and some of the important factors that were influential. In the summary of this section their views are compared to the wider sample of 23 five-year-olds' comments on entry to school. Of the seven case study children, one remembered feeling excited about starting school, while the others recalled feeling scared or unsure when they first started. These

feelings, both positive and negative, had been largely due to discontinuity between school and their earlier experiences.

Carl, who had not been particularly happy at kindergarten, was the one who commented most favourably on his transition. The kindergarten observations showed he tended to drift from one activity to the next, with much time spent playing in the sandpit (or in the bran trough when it was wet). His parents found he was frequently reluctant to go to kindergarten and put this down to the lack of challenge provided. His father noted that Carl would often "just sit and play in the sandpit for three and a half hours. That to me he could do that at home just as easily. He'd get more stimulation at home" (CS/F2.2, p21).

Keen to be included in any jobs around the house (especially anything mechanical), and with a father whose shift work meant that he was often home during the day, Carl did appear to receive more challenge at home:

> Like if I'm working out in the garage doing something, he's out there giving me a hand, and he's helpful in what he does. He's not just in the way, he wants to help; and he knows what should be and shouldn't be, and he'll soon tell me if I've made a mistake (CS/F 2.2, p11).

At four years old Carl was growing his own vegetables, participating in fence building around their property, and working with his Granddad repairing a camper van:

> If he's in there [with his Granddad] and doing something when I'm not there he'll give me a blow by blow account of how it's done. He's dead right too, he knows all about it (CS/F2.2, p12).

Already able to write his name, count to twenty and starting to decode text, Carl progressed rapidly in the new entrant classroom and was excited to be learning new things. His parents were delighted with his learning in school and reflected:

> After seeing what they do at school I am quite disappointed in what they did do at kindy really.... I know that interaction with other children and what not, but really most of the time he only ever played in the sandpit and perhaps painted some pictures (CS2.2, p17).

> When you see his rate of learning since he's been at school, and you see what he was like when he started kindy to when he left kindy, there was not that rate of learning (CS/F2.2, p17).

Carl also looked forward to playing sport at school and was pleased to not have restrictions on what he could eat, having found the kindergartens rules about healthy eating upsetting. Although he experienced a few difficulties with the physical nature of some boys' play (occasionally observed engaged in 'play fights', which got too rough) overall, for Carl, lack of continuity was seen as a bonus and he was excited and happy about his transition from the start. As an eight-year-old, when asked what we should tell four-year-olds about school Carl was the only one who focussed on subject knowledge, drawing and labeling the planets.

For the other children, a lack of continuity between kindergarten and school was temporarily unsettling. This was reflected in a number of aspects, including the physical environment, the length of the day and the demands of the curriculum. These themes are also evident in research from Britain (Cleave et al, 1982; Curtis, 1986) and Australia (Dockett & Perry, 1999). The children in this study recalled being surprised by the size of the school buildings and grounds, and the sheer number and size of the other children. Anna had thought, "There might just be one place" (p1) rather than a huge school. Tessa hadn't expected "three playgrounds and an enormous field and heaps of classrooms, 'cos in kindy there's just one big room" (p2). Matthew said, "You don't know how it's going to feel like. You don't know how much peoples there's going to be" (p2). Steve also commented that "There were lots of big people there [at school] and the playgrounds were much bigger and better, and there was no really small people except a few new people". Asked how that made him feel he said "Bored 'cos you've no idea what to do or anything because you have only just got there"(p2).

Curtis (1986) suggests that change during the transition to school should be gradual, with people, places and things being to some extent familiar. Although the children had all had at least one school visit this did not usually include a playtime or lunchtime, so exposure to the rather daunting playground and peer culture was quite a dramatic feature of many

children's early days and weeks. In an earlier paper I discussed how, for the majority of children lunchtime was the most difficult part of the school day (Peters, 1999a).

Being the only new child

The special nature of the New Zealand context, where children usually start school on their fifth birthday may heighten some of the discontinuities between settings, as children are absorbed into an active classroom, where little or no special arrangements are made to help the child adapt. (In comparison, where a group of children start together there may be time devoted to orientation.) Matthew's rather bewildering second day at school illustrates this. His class joined the whole junior school in the hall to practice the seating arrangements for a concert, a noisy and confusing experience, followed by a trip to the library with another class and their teacher. Each activity involved unfamiliar routines and large groups of unfamiliar people, and because he was away from his class teacher, no one realised that he was new.

Being the only very new child in the class could also lead to distress because he/she was not yet familiar with the language of the classroom (which as Curtis (1986) points out is often another source of discontinuity between early childhood and school). Soon after she started school Nicola was disappointed not to have received a book to read over the holidays. When she and her mother were interviewed a few weeks later Nicola explained that when the teacher had called her reading group (called the Herons) she hadn't gone. "When she said, "I want all the Herons" I didn't know what I was because I was quite new" (Nicola in CS1.2, p6).

Other children misunderstood the message carried by the school bells. A first bell signaled the start of lunchtime, and a second bell indicated that children who had finished eating could go and play. Many new entrant children took this to mean 'You must go and play' and those who had taken time to find their lunchboxes and a place to sit down were left with no time to actually eat anything. (Parents worried about uneaten lunches eventually identified this problem and asked the teacher to clarify the situation.)

These seemingly trivial incidents were often distressing to the children involved. An early study by Hughes, Pinkerton and Plewis (1979) suggested that when enrolment practices mean all the children are new, the teacher can devoted more time to settling the children in. The teachers in this study felt there were benefits in the New Zealand system because the established group of children could provide role models for the new children. However, as the data showed, while children often provided scaffolding for their peers, there were many instances in the busy life of a primary school where there was little support for a new child. It should be remembered though that these data were collected in a busy urban school where class sizes were large and enrolment of new children was frequent. In a rural area, or other location where new children start less frequently, or where new entrant classes are smaller, there may be more time to provide 'scaffolding' (Sanchez & Thorpe, 1998) for new children when they start.

Discontinuity of curriculum experiences

The kindergarten programmes the children had attended were broadly similar, although, as we will see later the parents and teachers had clear perceptions that some were more 'structured' than others. Regardless of which kindergarten they had attended, there was considerable discontinuity in the curriculum experiences for all of the children. They noted that there was less freedom of choice at school, compared with their experiences at kindergarten.

> At kindy you could usually always play most of the time and at school there is more work than playtime. I thought it was a bit weird when I first started. I thought "Hmm! Not much playtime here (Nicola, p2).

> Well it's different to kindergarten by not having all the time of being free and all the time being outside and having to do a lot more work and having to read books and lots of other things like that (Carl, pp1-2).

Steve mentioned the compulsion, and routines that provide a set time for work and for play, regardless of what you feel like doing. "At kindy you could play and everything but at school you have to do what you had to do. At kindy you could really choose" (p3). He would have liked to "go out to play when I had to stay in and do work and everything. Sometimes when I was out to play I actually wanted to go in and do some work" (p2).

The elements of compulsion were also noted by Matthew. "It [school] was different 'cos you have to learn stuff, and every time you have got something to do" (p2).

Observations at kindergarten showed Matthew was engaged in a wide range of activities, usually with groups of children. He also initiated activities independently. On one occasion he found an illustration of an aeroplane in a book, constructed a plane from materials at the carpentry table, painted it red, played with it and then was asked to show it to the other children at mat time where he explained that he had made "a fire blast off plane". This showed persistence with an activity and also the way in which he could carry an idea through into different contexts, something that was not observed at school, where learning was more fragmented, with the move from one discrete lesson to the next. Matthew's comment, noted above, about "every time you have got something to do" was a valid comment on the nature of the school programme he experienced.

As an eight-year-old Matthew summed up his view of starting school, saying:

> When I started school it was quite hard to learn and I didn't know a lot of stuff when I first started school and I was really nervous when I started school. It was really hard because heaps of big kids boss you around when you start school and you don't know how it's going to feel like. It's really hard when you start school because, the only one thing that's hard is trying to get everything right and (long pause) you don't know how it's going to feel like 'cos you've never been to school before (Matthew, p2).

The challenge of trying to "get everything right" was evident in Matthew's written work. Although he was a proficient artist his mother reported that:

> Well he went into a phase where he didn't pick up reading very quickly.... And his writing really didn't, there was a lot of reversing and it was a struggle, and I did get a bit worried about it (CS7.3, p1).

This was resolved in his second year at school.

> And now it's all just suddenly, everything's fallen into place. He's raced ahead on reading.... He'd gone level, level, level. And his writing's legible. He still occasionally reverses but not very often. So it was like he had quite a latent period (CS7.3, p1). I don't know if he had a period where he needed to take it all in without putting out.... With Matthew it was nothing, and then everything all at once. So I don't think there's any one factor, it's just for him developmental (CS7.3, p8).

His mother described the process as developmental, although, as Pollard's (1996) detailed case studies showed, the context of his new classroom may also account for this change.

For Nicola, who found the work easy, there were also discontinuities to adapt to in the learning environment. Seen as very capable at kindergarten her teachers gave her special attention, extra resources and conversed with her in a sophisticated way. Her early childhood experiences both at kindergarten and home appeared responsive and challenging, with lots of autonomy and opportunities for discussion and negotiation with adults. However, her initial transition to school was very difficult (with lots of crying and screaming and clinging to her mother in the mornings). Observations suggested that Nicola might have had problems adjusting to the demands for unexplained conformity required at school and the lack of adult contact. Although she eventually settled, her mother felt that Nicola remained under-extended throughout her first year at school. (Nicola's story has been told in more detail in Peters (2000).) Her experiences of moving from a very responsive early childhood setting to a school environment where there was little choice and few explanations were similar to the child in Norris's (1999) study where the "star of the crèche" was transformed "into a new entrant with problem behaviour" (p188). Fortunately for Nicola the problems were short-lived and she quickly conformed to the requirements of the school routine and increasingly took on a leadership role in the classroom.

Although never outwardly distressed, perhaps the most difficult transition of the seven case study children was the one made by Anna. The observations suggested that Anna, for a variety of reasons, received little teacher or peer support during her early weeks in the classroom and the interviews indicated that she was perceived by her teacher as having difficulties with reading and writing. By her third week Anna declared "I hate school. I only like the playing and the eating. I don't like the writing", a view that persisted though the following months. In later years she remained, according to her mother, rather ambivalent about school, although at age eight she told the researcher that she was "quite happy" at school and "I mostly like everything". (Anna's story has been discussed in more

detail in Peters (1999a)). Reflecting on the experiences of children like her, who spend long periods of classroom time unsure of what they should be doing, Anna offered the advice that teachers should "tell them [children] again if they didn't hear" (p4). She also thought that parents should stay with their children when they first start, and if the parent works they "should just quit work for a little while and then go back" (p4), despite the fact that when she started school she had not outwardly protested at her own mother leaving.

The significance of these early transition experiences

Although, as these excerpts from the case studies illustrate, aspects of discontinuity provided challenge for the children on entry to school, in general they adapted quickly to the new environment. For the most part, once they got used to the lunchtime culture the children enjoyed the opportunities for play and when asked what four-year-olds should know about school many talked positively about the playgrounds. They also adapted to the demands of the new curriculum, and while school was seen as a place where you worked hard at compulsory tasks there was an element of pride in their achievements, and hard work and learning was valued by these children. Heather thought that school was "pretty neat" because "you get into harder stuff for maths" (p2). Matthew too liked the fact that "You learn heaps of stuff and if you didn't go to school you wouldn't learn anything and by the time you grow old you actually know stuff and when you first starts school you don't know much" (p2).

By age eight some of the earlier causes of distress were not recalled. One feature Nicola had particularly disliked when she first started had been folk dancing in the school hall, but when asked as an eight-year-old what she had disliked about it, she couldn't even recall that they had done any folk dancing.

Therefore while the transition experiences were important, early difficulties did not always lead to poor school experiences, as is implied by Dockett and Perry (1999) and Early et al (1990). The long-term impact of transition may relate more to the ongoing nature of the children's experiences. For these children, two important factors appeared to be their relationships with friends and their families.

Friendships

The children who had reported feeling scared or unsure when they first started, noted that these feelings had quickly passed. Friends were mentioned as key factors in assisting children's transition to school, something that has been noted in other transition studies (Dockett & Perry, 1999; Margetts, 199 Tessa reported feeling scared until she made friends, Carl's excitement was partly due to new friends, and Heather had not expected "That I would get tons of friends, make friends, more each day" (p2). Anna, who had difficulty establishing a special friendship during her first year, thought that adults could improve school by ensuring that everyone has a friend.

Parental involvement

Although the seven case study children came from very different family backgrounds (see Appendix A) they all had parents who were intensely interested in their children's education and were keen to support and facilitate their early learning and their transition to school. Over the years there were many instances of parents mediating between their child and the school, helping to shape the child's educational experiences, in ways that were similar to, but usually less overt, than those of the upper-middle class parents in Lareau's (1989) American study. The parents' willingness to participate in the research project perhaps illustrates their interest in education generally, and their child's experiences in particular. The discontinuity may well have been greater for children with less involved parents.

Summarising the children's perspectives on early learning

One thread that we can see in the case study children's discussions of their transition experiences relates to their view of early learning. Their recollection of less freedom, more teacher direction, and the need to be 'right' as characterising the change from early childhood education to school touches on a widely acknowledged difference between the ideologies and pedagogy of early childhood education and compulsory schooling in many countries around the world (Corrie, 1998). Their views as eight-year-olds were consistent with the ideas of many of the 23 child participants at age five, who commented on their

surprise at finding their days so days at school were so controlled compared to kindergarten. They disliked not being able to play when they wanted, being limited as to when they could go outside, not having access to resources like art materials and playdough and being told what to do all the time (Peters, 1999a). There is a clear perception from the children's point of view that there was a lack of continuity between their learning in at kindergarten and their experiences at school. The following section explores the adult participants' views about continuity in children's early learning.

Teachers' and parents' views about continuity in early learning

The early childhood teachers

The teachers at Azure Kindergarten worked closely with the new entrant teachers at Kowhai school to provide some similarities in the programmes (in terms of mat times, behaviour management techniques and language used) and to foster some of the skills the new entrant teachers believed were important, in the belief that some continuity in early learning was useful. The head teacher Ms Ashby saw early childhood education as preparation for life but noted that:

> ...school happens to be the next rung of the ladder of life and it is stupid to say that you are not preparing them for school because you are... Some of the things that we try to do particularly here is to develop their inquisitiveness and independence and self esteem.... They have also learnt to listen, to participate, to be part of a group and to respect people. They have got to learn to share. I feel that's our duty in helping them to the transition to the next phase of their life (Ms A, p9).

> We find it works very well. And because we have instilled certain values in the children they know to sit still. They know how to listen. They know to contribute. They just fit in (Ms A, p11).

At Blue Kindergarten the head teacher, Ms Bird said she actively resisted pressure to introduce a more school-like level of structure to the early childhood programme, believing that discontinuity between the practices in the two settings did not have to be overcome by making the early childhood programme more formal. "That's just a fact of life that the rules are different for different times and places in your life". What she saw as important were the supports in terms of contact with schools and visits that would help

children and parents cope with the changes, and she encouraged parents to be proactive in requesting these. There was also an explicit focus on supporting the children's development of social skills in this centre, including conflict resolution and handling difficult situations.

In the past the staff at Cobalt Kindergarten had had close links with the local school but at the time of the study this wasn't happening. Nevertheless, as children approached five the head teacher, Ms Clark said that she would "really start to hone in" on the skills she felt children would need at school such as self help and social skills. To a lesser extent she might also encourage children to write their name. This was achieved by working alongside individual children rather than in formal sessions.

New entrant teachers

The new entrant teachers were keen to provide some continuity between learning at school and the children's earlier experiences. They conducted detailed assessments of the children's skills on entry to assist in their curriculum planning; in order to build on children's existing knowledge. As noted above, they also worked closely with the teachers at Azure Kindergarten to provide some continuity in terms of language used and behaviour management techniques. They felt the children who had attended Azure Kindergarten had skills that eased the transition process. For example "they know how to sit at mat time, how to listen" (Ms Keane, p12). They were also seen to have developed independence and initiative, which the teachers thought was important. "If they take responsibility for their own learning and are working independently it means they are not easily distracted" (Ms Keane, p9).

The new entrant teachers had no contact with the other early childhood centres that contributed to Kowhai school. Ms King was a little disapproving of the other early childhood settings as she felt they did not prepare children to sit on the mat. "I know they do at Azure, but if they go to a crèche or a different kindy and the children aren't ready, they will say 'they aren't ready for that' yet"(p17). Overall though attendance at any early

childhood centre tended to be viewed as beneficial, especially in relation to the child's social, physical and emotional well being.

Despite the new entrant teachers' interest in providing some continuity in children's early learning, as we have seen, the children were aware of the many discontinuities that existed between their learning in early childhood and their experiences at school. They adapted to the greater controls and restrictions placed on them in the move from a more child-centred curriculum to one that was teacher led but in doing so the character of their learning also changed. The nature of many of the tasks in the new entrant classroom seem likely to foster performance goals, rather than learning goals (utilising the descriptions of these provided by Carr (1997)). There were lots of mathematics and reading worksheets, and even story writing had a set format that had to be followed. As we have seen, many children found these tasks appropriately challenging and enjoyed their subsequent mastery of them, although as Matthew noted the initial focus on "getting everything right" was sometimes hard.

Even though the teachers completed detailed assessments of each child to assist in their planning, there were times when the demands of the tasks were perhaps not well matched to the child. Anna's difficulties quickly led her to conclude that she hated school, while for Nicola the new entrant curriculum did not match the responsive challenges she had experienced in early childhood.

The parents

Overall, analysis of the twenty-three parents' comments indicates that many parents, (rather like the new entrant teachers), valued what they called a level of 'structure' in their four-year-olds' learning in early childhood centres, seeing this as advantageous in their children's preparation for school, because it would provide some continuity between the settings. (A view that was also evident in other New Zealand research conducted by McLeod and Butler (1999).) For some parents this meant providing children with routines such as when to eat and set activities to complete, for others it was simply a more explicit focus on cognitive development than they felt was evident in programmes they described

as free-play. For example, Azure Kindergarten was described as more structured that the other local kindergartens, and yet, apart from occasional lengthy mat times (where the emphasis was on 'learning to sit still, listen and contribute'), observations suggested that there was little that early childhood educators would class as formal structure in the programme (no worksheets or teacher-directed lessons). Teachers were, however, actively engaged in stimulating, challenging and scaffolding children's thinking and learning, sometimes to impressive levels. The excitement and interest this generated in some children was commented on by parents.

In this case it seemed that 'structure' could be equated with more direct teacher interaction with the children. An example of this was provided by Carl's parents, who had moved his younger sister, Carol, to Azure Kindergarten. They compared Carol's exploration of the way the human body functions, leading to demands for more knowledge from her parents and her enthusiastic collection of resources on the heart, lungs and circulation system to take to kindergarten to share with teachers and peers, to Carl's rather desultory digging in the sandpit at Blue Kindergarten. It appeared that for Carol her teachers had helped her to find meaning and take on some of the activities at the centre, while for Carl, what was of interest was more likely to be happening at home (Carr, 1998a, 1998c).

Although the numbers involved in this study are very small, given the common parental view that structure is important for continuity and early learning, it is relevant to consider how the case study children from settings perceived to be structured (Azure) and unstructured (Blue) fared when they got to school. Anna's attendance at Azure Kindergarten had left her well versed in the skills required to sit on the mat, and independent in her self care skills but these were not enough to ensure a smooth transition to school. Although less pronounced, Steve and Matthew also encountered aspects of difficulty during the transition from Azure to school, while for Heather the move went well. Tessa and Carl, the two case study children who attended Blue Kindergarten both made smooth transitions, although their stories are quite different.

As we have seen, Carl, whose interests seemed to lie at home rather than at kindergarten, saw the new entrant classroom as a site of 'educational challenge' (Carr, 2000) and responded positively. In contrast, Tessa was a very active child who enjoyed the opportunities for outdoor play on offer at kindergarten. Her learning goals in early childhood appeared to be of a physical rather than an academic nature and Tessa's mother felt school was going to be a "real shock" to Tessa "I think she is going to have real trouble, she is going to want to eat her lunch at nine thirty and go out and play at quarter past" (CS4.1, p4). She worried "will she go the distance with pen and paper? I just don't know if that's her" (CS4.1, p6). However, after two months at school she reported that Tessa "loves it. She just loves it, and I'm really surprised... I just can't believe we've had no trouble settling her in" (CS4.2, p1). A view that was supported by observations of Tessa in the classroom.

From her study of transition Norris (1999) suggests that less responsive early childhood programmes may prepare children for the inevitable lack of attention when they face the much higher child to adult ratios at school. In contrast, when early childhood programmes "had offered the children so much, they had been inadvertently 'set up' to experience relative deprivation at school" (p191). She suggests that discontinuity is perhaps greater for children who have received high quality early childhood education (as we saw with Nicola in this study). Norris (1999) notes that this is not an argument against high quality early childhood education, "if anything it calls for greater teacher numbers in schools" (p191).

Therefore, while parents' concerns that children were not sufficiently challenged at Blue Kindergarten may be warranted, lack of structure in terms of routines and mat times did not provide the difficulties on the transition to school that were anticipated. However, there may be many other factors at work. The reasons why a child's transition is smooth or difficult goes beyond simple explanations such as slight differences in the early childhood programme. Nevertheless it is worth reflecting on the role of the social skills programme offered by Blue Kindergarten, given that the development of friends played such a vital role in facilitating children's transition.

It is also important to note that, regardless of the parents' and teachers' views of the kindergarten programmes, within each centre there were children who experienced the curriculum differently. The enthusiastic teacher interaction and scaffolding at Azure Kindergarten did not reach all of the children. Quiet and self-reliant, Anna spent her days in the centre with almost no direct contact with the teachers or other children; perhaps fostering independent learning dispositions that later proved to be at odds with the demands of the new entrant classroom, where the use of peers and adults as resources appeared advantageous (see Peters, 1999a).

Implications for practice

The results of this study indicate many discontinuities in the children's experiences as they move from early childhood to school. As earlier research has shown (Cleave et al, 1982; Curtis, 1986; Ledger et al, 1998; Renwick, 1987) these discontinuities can be a source of distress for young children. Perhaps more surprisingly, where discontinuity was associated with delight in learning new things, it could also be a source of pleasure, as was illustrated by Carl's story. Even where discontinuity was temporarily unsettling this did not necessarily have long-term consequences for children's attitudes towards school. Although some problems persisted through the first year, by age eight the case study children all professed to be enjoying school. Scaffolding and support through the transition appeared to be more important than the precise nature of the discontinuities that were faced. The support of family, teachers and friends appeared vital in helping children to overcome initial difficulties. Without such support the consequences may have been associated with the less positive trajectories reported by other writers (Dockett & Perry, 1999; Early et al, 1990).

With only one teacher and up to 29 'just turned' five-year-olds the degree of individual attention the teacher can provide is necessarily limited. There is a strong argument for reducing new entrant class sizes so that the learning environment can be more responsive to individual children, but meanwhile it is clear from these data that the nature of the

children's ongoing experiences, and the relationships with families and friends can do much to ameliorate early difficulties.

In an educational climate that is increasingly focused on literacy and numeracy skills as important for children's early learning it is important to draw attention to the much wider processes involved. Early skills, particularly in numeracy, may be related to later success in this area (Wylie & Thompson, 1998; Young-Loveridge, 1991), and are therefore important, but other learning strategies contribute to children's competence as early learners. Given the vital role that friends could play in children's experiences at school this is an aspect that is worthy of further attention. While teachers cannot make friendships happen they can put in place strategies that support children's social relationships. Some of Meyer and Bevan-Browns (2000) ideas about how teachers might foster social inclusion for children with special needs could perhaps be useful for all children. Other approaches like Fabian's (2000) suggestions for providing children with opportunities to discuss and rehearse strategies for dealing with situations they might meet at school could also be useful.

Carr's (1998c) work on learning stories as a framework for assessment, developed after the data were collected, could have important implications for children's early learning both in early childhood settings and at school. The first step in the learning story assessment looks at whether the child has found something of interest here. For Carl his early childhood teachers could have helped him to find something of interest in the kindergarten setting, as his father had done at home. In contrast Carl found the challenges of the classroom of relevance and he was able to apply the learning dispositions established at home to school tasks. For Nicola there was much that was of interest in early childhood, but perhaps little of initial interest or challenge at school. Helping a very capable child like Nicola to find something of interest to apply her talents to may have helped to facilitate her transition. For Anna it seemed that the challenges of early childhood and school were both of interest but while she could establish her own involvement with activities at kindergarten (the next step of the learning story), she needed help to become involved with the teacher-oriented activities at school. The emphasis on performance

rather than learning in many new entrant learning activities may have further prevented her from persisting with tasks, like writing, that she decided were difficult, for fear of being wrong. Performance goals may also have inhibited Matthew's early literacy learning, with his comment about the need to try "to get everything right".

Focussing on children's learning dispositions as well as their skills in the new entrant classroom may do much to facilitate children's transition to school. For this reason, rather than an increasing 'push down' of school pedagogy to early childhood as described by Corrie (1999) there may be benefits in exploring the possibilities of utilising aspects of the early childhood curriculum in the first year of school. As with the Swedish children in Pramling & Williams-Graneld's (1993) study, the most valued aspect of the transition to school for many of the children in this study was their pleasure in learning new things. Consideration of children's learning dispositions and exploring ways in which these can be fostered at school could help to ensure that more children engage positively with the content of the school curriculum.

Conclusion

In New Zealand, as in many other countries, there is a degree of discontinuity between the ideas, philosophies and pedagogies of the early childhood and primary sectors. While there are multiple perspectives on this, as there are on other aspects of the transition, many people value greater structure, in the form of routines and formal activities, as a way of providing continuity between settings, without apparently considering what this means for children's learning. The experiences of the children in this study suggests that the level of formal 'structure' experienced in early childhood bears little relationship to the nature of their transitions. These children adapted to the more controlled nature of the school day, although the extent to which the curriculum on offer fitted with their skills and learning dispositions varied. What appeared to be of greater importance was the nature of the support they received and the connections between family, teachers and peers. The transition experience itself is so complex, the findings of this study support earlier research which shows that it is futile to view efforts to facilitate it just in relation to preparing the child (Ghaye & Pascal, 1988). As Graue (1993) considers, it is not just the

nature of tasks that children are confronted with that determine their ability to cope, the patterns of social interaction play an important role in this process.

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